

Christ the King Sunday, November 26
The Rev. Glen Gleaves

Well, this is a version of "My Dog Ate My Homework" –for days I've been having trouble with my old computer. Finally last night it gagged on my Word Perfect files, wouldn't print, and unceremoniously refused to go further. Couldn't e-mail it, print it, or edit it on Donna's computer, then put it to paper.

So, today, the last-minute meditation comes to you from the keyboard of Bishop Andy Doyle, of the Diocese of Texas. Thankfully, he puts his usable thoughts out there for just such an occasion!

This is Christ the King Sunday. The last Sunday of the Christian Year; next week is the first Sunday of Advent.

So in this last gospel passage from Matthew for the year we have an image of Christ as King, at the end time. We have a great judgement going on and a division of the sheep and the goats. This reading can cause incredible anxiety and does weird things to us as Christians.

Preachers sometime muse that there will be a great number of people in Church this Sunday discomfited by this passage. And the few that are comfortable probably shouldn't be. Let's be honest: we do worry about getting into heaven and it is typically such a disquieting notion that we don't pay any attention to it at all and so dismiss all accountability for our actions. Or we lord this over others. We say things like we must save all those goats. Or, we should do mission and just let God do the sorting out. We worry about parents and family members and ourselves. We have lists of things we have done that are bad and really bad. All in all, I think we read this passage and we miss the whole point.

Do I think there is going to be a judgement? Yes, I say so every week in the creed and I believe it. I sure hope the meager life of service and a full measure of God's grace and love will help me make the cut. But that is not what this text is really saying to me and to us as a church. At least I don't think it is. I don't think God wants us to worry about that stuff-- the end times and what will happen when we die. We all die and it will eventually happen and we hope that when it happens we may pass from life to everlasting life –*with no pain!* That is our hope and upon such hope I have to have faith.

But I think the purpose of the passages which urge vigilance and seek to encourage action on our part have three basic points to offer us as Christians trying to live a Christian life, as Episcopalians trying to live out that particularly difficult baptismal covenant that we are continuously promising to keep.

First, I think the intention of Jesus' ministry has been to tell people that God **does** love them and God **cares** for them. God cares so much that he wants to gather them in and that God wants for us to be one unified family. I think as part of that message Jesus also conveys in his teaching the reality that God cares what we do and how we treat one another.

In a society where most people believe in God, also believe that God is distant (except when they need something), and they believe God wants them to be a good person and be happy.

This is a very difficult passage to read. It says quite the opposite in fact. The passage says that God is near, God cares, God hopes we will live a life completely oriented on God and not our happiness, and that God wishes us to act and make the world sustainable for all people.

The second point that I think this passage is clear about is that God wants us to act now and not wait. This is a Gospel shift from the Early Church's inherited Jewish tradition that understood it was good to confess on your death bed assuring your amendment of life. The Emperor Constantine believed –and did– this.

However, the Gospel of Jesus seeks amendment of life - this reorientation to God and action on God's behalf daily is what scripture calls for. The sense of urgency, the idea the kingdom is now, it isn't just coming, but that we have an opportunity to live in the reign of God today –and this is an ancient Gospel truth, that the Kingdom is already here and now –not just in the Sweet By-and-By.

The last point of this passage is that God wishes for us to understand that one of the primary ways we amend life is by serving others who have no value to society, but who have value to God. The poor, the hungry, the naked, and those in prison are of such value to God that in our passage today they are the incarnational (little *I*) presence of Jesus in the world.

If we are serious about placing God in Jesus Christ at the center of our lives, upon the throne of our hearts, we cannot separate this trifold reality of his reign from our spiritual pilgrimage on this earth. The king of our spiritual life cares how his subjects treat one another. The king expects actions to be taken on his behalf now and in this world; the kingdom is not about what happens to us when we die. And, the king himself is incarnationally present in pauper's robes, with a hungry outstretched hand, and with legs shackled.

We live out our life towards our passing and towards the final judgment by making God first, and making neighbor second.

This notion is not simply a discipleship rule but it is the rule that Jesus lives out in his own life. Remembering the model for Christian fellowship, mission, and discipleship in Matthew's Gospel is a reflection of Jesus' own life. We cannot help but hear the last words of this Sunday's Gospel as fulfillment of Jesus' own princely rule lived out in this world. He will love God whom he calls Father to the very end; he will love us (even forgiving us from the cross) and he will love us as neighbors and friends. In the end, Jesus himself comes to us and gives us his very self, sacrificially, for his fellow men and women, even though we be bound by the shackles of sin, we have the outstretched hand for grace, and we have a heart clothed in the robes of earthly pretenders to the throne.

Goats we are;
in Jesus, sheep we become.

The Rt. Rev. Andy Doyle